

Testimony of Larimer County Commissioner Steve Johnson

Congressional Western Caucus Field Hearing

Denver, Colorado

May 2, 2013

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Caucus, thank you for this opportunity to speak to you about recent wildfires in Larimer County and related forest health issues. My name is Steve Johnson and I am currently the chair of the Larimer County Board of Commissioners. I would like to use my time to share with you recent events in my county and offer three suggestions of how we might strengthen our partnership in wildfire response and in improving forest conditions.

The High Park fire in Larimer County started on June 9, 2012 as a result of a lightning strike some time before and it burned for three weeks until it was contained on July 1, 2012. The fire burned 87,200 acres (136 square miles) in the foothills and National Forest west of Fort Collins, Colorado and destroyed 259 residences. It was the largest and most destructive fire in the history of my county, and the second most destructive in the history of Colorado.

I have three main points I would like to share with you today: the FEMA definition of an event, the time requirement for spending EWP funds, and the need for availability of firefighting resources earlier in the year.

Before I get to those points, let me thank you and the Congress for the additional appropriation of monies to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) program that you included in the March, 2013 Continuing Resolution. I especially want to commend the bipartisan work of our local Congressional Representatives, Cory Gardner and Jared Polis. This funding is of enormous help to us as we deal with subsequent high flooding risk, degraded water quality, and eroded watersheds. It also needs to be said that our entire Colorado delegation in the United States Congress and in the Senate has been of extraordinary assistance to us in local government as we deal with the effects of this disaster.

FEMA Definition of Incident Period

Now to my three points, the first one being the FEMA definition of Incident Period. This definition probably serves to assess most Eastern and East Coast disasters quite well because with a flood, hurricane or tornado event most damage occurs during the incident itself. When the incident is over an assessemnt can pretty much ascertain what damage there is to deal with. This is definitely not the case with a wildfire, which in the arid West is one of the most significant natural disaster threats we face. The FEMA definition of Incident Period, as it functions during a wildfire, limits damage assessment to that which occurred during the fire event or major portion of the fire event itself. As we found with this and other fires, significant damage occurs after the fire is contained. By excluding that damage from the assessment process, we are significantly limited in the amount and type of assistance we can qualify for. It seems to us in order to accurately and fairly quantify the damage as a result of a wildfire

disaster and to apply the appropriate level of assistance to such an event, this Incident Period definition should take into account the fact that the disaster is not over completely when the wildfire is contained.

Of particular concern to us is our ability to respond to the potential for significant threats to life, safety, property, transportation infrastructure, and water quality as a result of the increased flooding potential, erosion and debris flows. The High Park Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER) Report has prepared hydrologic modeling of expected run-off flows in the burn area as a result of the dramatically altered conditions. Their modelling predicts increased flows in the range of 116% to 4,194%. That's an incredible 40 fold increase in run-off in some areas. Seventy-five percent of the burn area drains into the Cache la Poudre River, which is the source of drinking water for 300,000 people in Northern Colorado. Poudre River water actually did become unusable for those residents and the city of Fort Collins at about mid-June 2012 and continued for about 90 days due to the extremely high levels of sediment and ash suspended in the water. Fortunately, due to the alternative of obtaining water from the Big Thompson Project of transmountain diversion and reservoir storage, a suitable drinking water source was available to those residents. I don't even want to imagine or speculate what we would have to have done without this option. A major component of our EWP funds have gone and will go to attenuating this run-off in order to protect not only water quality, but lives and property from the immediate danger of flash flooding to which we are always in danger of even in normal years due to our summer afternoon thunderstorms, but so much moreso as a result of the High Park fire.

Period in which to expend EWP Funds

My second point would be a request that consideration be given to extending the time period in which EWP funds must be spent beyond the current 220 day time limit; partly because of the extended nature of a wildfire disaster, and partly because of the time needed for the analysis, engineering, and contracting for the projects necessary to deal with the damage caused by the fire. We would suggest 18 months as a more workable time period for the expenditure of these funds.

Availability of Resources

My third point is our concern for the availability of manpower and air resources earlier in the year. Given that we are experiencing a severe and multi-year drought throughout the West, we are seeing and are expecting to see more wildfires, more severe wildfires, and more wildfires outside of the typical wildfire season.

This year in Larimer County we have already seen a significant wildfire with the Galena fire which occurred in mid-March of this year burning almost 1400 acres west of Fort Collins, an unusual wildfire in that it happened so early in the season but perhaps a warning of what's to come.

With most Federal firefighting crews being seasonal employees, there was not a lot of manpower available for a fire that occurred so much earlier than was expected. In addition we have been told delays in contracting for air tanker resources delayed the availability of air resources in this instance. Such air resources are often critical in getting an important early response for wildfires that often start in remote and difficult terrain.

Again, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to visit with you about these issues which are so very important to Colorado. We greatly appreciate and value the collaboration we share with the Federal government as we respond to these natural disasters, recover from the long-lasting effects of them, and seek to prevent or at least reduce their severity in the future. I hope this information and these thoughts have been helpful to you.



Steve Johnson is Chair of the Larimer County Board of Commissioners and has represented District 2 for 5 years. Prior to his election as Commissioner, he served for 6 years in the Colorado State Senate and 6 years in the Colorado House of Representatives.

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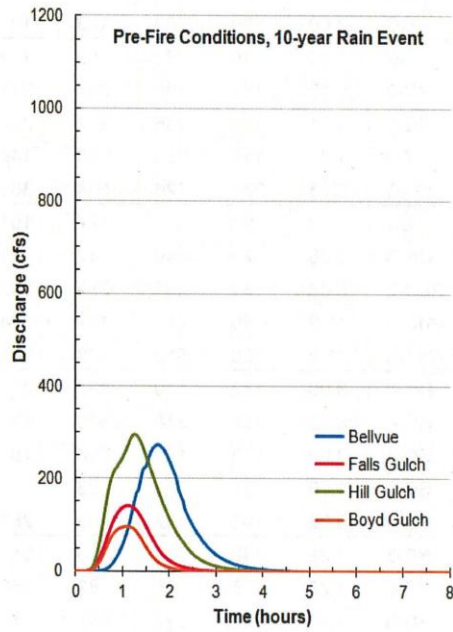


Figure 9: Selected pre-fire hydrographs, 10-year rain event.

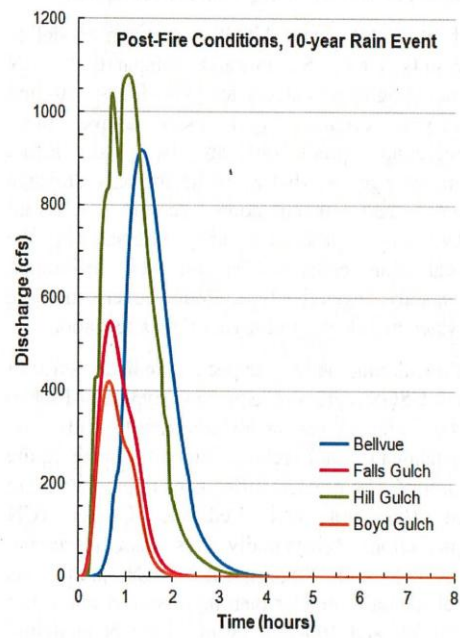


Figure 10: Selected post-fire hydrographs, 10-year rain event.

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Boyd Gulch, Larimer County Colorado. Vehicle burned in the High Park Fire and buried by subsequent flooding from dramatically increased runoff conditions during post-fire July 6, 2012 One inch rain event.